CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF WORSHIP ISSUES IN THE CYBERSPACE

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by storm, and the church was left with how to grapple with the loss of the physical embodiment of its devotional activities, resulting in the practice of virtual worship through the internet, known as cyberspace. The post-COVID era tends to have raised another concern about some, who now regard cyberspace as a place of permanent devotional and worship engagement. Critical Appraisal of Worship in Cyberspace seeks to highlight inherent issues raised by the advent of cyber worship and online devotional practices. Given ongoing narratives, it evaluates perceived problems against traditional norms and suggests a way forward. The paper critically appraises selected studies regarding liturgical practices on the internet and weighs issues critical to Christian evangelical faith and practice. The article notes that cyberspace will never be able to represent the Christian worship experience fully. It recommends that worship in cyberspace be left to emergencies and not necessarily expediencies on the part of members when they cannot make it in person.

Keywords: *Critical Appraisal, Worship, Issues, Cyberspace, COVID-19*

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic, code-named Covid-19, suddenly put the world in a surprising fist of diplomatic realignments in creative virtual forms. It forced everyone into a cyber asylum – home for all, driven from the concrete world into a computer-facilitated world. Nevertheless, the virtual world stage is no new platform for religious or Christian worship activities except for those in the world's typical African or rural clime. The Internet is a sprawling space for social interactions, business connections, and a virtual material store for information and religion. It is a country for all without natural borders and a virtual nation with no actual physical structures, known as cyberspace.

One easy take-home from the pandemic is that it also accentuates a new reality of possibilities online. More than was thought possible, some have begun to develop an interest in exploring cyberspace's opportunities. Before Covid 19, only a tiny section of the Christian community in Nigeria was online. However, with the prevailing health situation, it became apparent to religious authorities that some connection in virtual space is essential.

The reality is that cyberspace is now foisted with many religious activities, especially since the pandemic in the African setting. However, it is not without drawing much uneasiness and debates about its suitability for enacting Christian worship. While some are more open to the latest practice, it is tricky for some who cannot fathom a spiritual reality in cyberspace. For these, they need to understand the debates, cross-reference opinions, and provide answers to questions that will enable them to forge a meaningful worship experience in the newfound cyber-world.

Moreover, there seem to be many desperate but legitimate worries here and there, and one is to state that the worship wars (as initially enunciated by Dawn) have truly only shifted its battlefield to another turf, cyberspace. It seems to the writer that from verbal discussions on this issue of worship online, issues of embodiment, online liturgical practices of Holy Communion, prayer, and music tend to tint asymmetrically toward a direction given one's power of technology. Whatever the argument, the Bible and other tools cannot but come in handy for an honest Christian

worship discourse. To this end, this paper intends to highlight the issues and concerns raised and weigh them against known or perceived facts to see what direction they project for the church in Nigeria.

Nature of Cyberspace as a virtual Temple

The need to inspire some basic understanding of cyberspace underlines this paper's approach, and it begins with the fact that cyberspace is as nuanced as the real world. C. Inglis defines it as the "meld of technology, people and the procedures that bind the two," the interchange of technology and individuals. Teresa Berger speaks of cyberspace as a digital technology that allows individuals to engage others with the use of software through a screen interface. Given that cyberspace consists of computer networks worldwide, nevertheless. Heidi Campbell (2004) sees it as an otherworldly space for spiritual engagements but in a way that challenges traditional concepts. This understanding, no doubt, calls for biblical standards on which it could rest. However, the sense of an otherworldly could draw from its seemingly distant nature from concrete reality.

Cyberspace is a network of computer-mediated spaces where some Christian houses have also now pitched their tents for Christian fellowships and other religious engagements. However, cyberspace has the potential to be vastly misunderstood owing to its seeming intangibility. In some ways, it speaks of the divine's uncharted course and the need to understand it. Berger noted that cyberspace is constantly changing, complex, and ever-growing. She argued that cyberspace as a social communication platform could not be separated from the sacred liturgy. However, the limited extent to which it plays a role in worship, especially when embodying it, does not seem to support her assertion.

Notably, social entertainment abounds in cyberspace but is subject to related uses one applies to it. The sacred liturgy is only one means of finding its relevant appropriation into church life. However, the researcher notes that cyberspace provides a much-needed escalator to church devotional life and theology. This wider dimension regarding the extent of reach is latent to the church's purpose and gospel witness. Notwithstanding this application, it is imperative to state that liturgical

theology is to reflect the implicit enunciations of worship rites explicitly; therefore, cyberspace may come in handy as the archetypical amplifier of worship, Christian theology and its resultant devotions.

The theological ground for cyber worship activities stems from God's liberalisation of worship engagement from one ethnoreligious entity to the whole world. Hebrews 8: 7-13, especially verses 6-8(a), 10-11, and 13, show a significant renewal of the worship space. By this, the Bible suggests that God removed established institutions favouring individual engagements with divine prompts. The intrinsic motivation, therefore, is divine deposits of the word of God as captured by that person's experience. While there are dangers, the plus of cyberspace is that it does escalate this type of spiritual engagement at a historically enduring and ever-growing speed with the advent of the 5G network; it is also easily retrievable. Also, the Bible refers to an eschatological experience where a blast of trumpet in heaven shall be heard worldwide. Much of this truth avails itself in the advent of information technology and the internet, where it is possible to see events in real time worldwide (I Thes. 4: 16-17).

Worship Issues in Cyberspace

Arguments exist on the embodiment of online worship and how it mirrors liturgical practices in computer-mediated networks. In a tweet, Scott Aniol (@ScottAniol) only recently hinted at a bias typical of an evangelical leaning: "corporate worship assumes the necessity of a physical gathering where we do physical things." This concern raises the salient question of embodiments of the virtual world's worship space against the Christian worship culture in concrete forms. David de Bruyn once enunciated that the church's quick resort to online worship could be the wrong response to God's promptings through adversity. There is the fear that devotional practice in the virtual space might be as it is, physically intangible, unreal, and without substantial value for the kingdom and eternity. Thus, Joseph Macalanggan sees cyberspace as an illusionary world and a possible rebellion tool, obscuring the divide between the secular and the sacred. He puts it thus:

It is a fatal error to consider cyberspace, which is outside of reality, for more than what it is. At first sight, men's temptation to view cyberspace as a real world is understandable since we think and even rationalise that this misconception will not endanger us. However, in observing Internet use and the motivations guiding many users, we can assess the enjoyment experienced in building up this false world and the intention of creating a new cyber-Babel.

In alluding to the Babel experience regarding a people who wanted a world in their name (Gen. 11: 1-8), Bruyn draws attention to the conscription of all into a world at the whims of a remote human controller. Similarly, Macalanggan noted that technology now controls people and threatens honest communication. Expressions like the one shown above present cyber worship in such a way as to erode its spiritual integrity.

However, the virtual world is a platform for good, as it is possible to employ it for the wrong purpose. Cyberspace presents a novel opportunity for all to either reach out or be reached, and it will take a while for the church to capture the potential of the cyber world completely. Kimberly Knight affirms that it is a learning process to understand what it means to be church online. She further noted the fulfilment of creating a participatory space for Christians and seekers, those considered "un-churched and de-churched," and to welcome all in God's gracious name to worship; and that "what may appear to be play-acting is for many is a solemn and faithful act of worship and community." Be that as it may, in the writer's opinion, the church has come to terms with a load of responsibility hanging on her shoulders. First, Campbell noted that "online technology use and choices cannot be easily disembedded from offline contexts, and so requires looking at how offline practices guide online beliefs and behaviours."

Analysis of Issues in Cyber Christian Worship

The embodiment of Cyberspace and God

There is a deep-seated evangelical traditional tapestry when it comes to worship in the bodily presence of others in a physical church. The liturgical shift of activities to cyberspace leaves no room for architectural reflections of Christian traditions' set

beliefs and practices. For instance, Oluwasayo Oladejo articulated the likelihood of delineating Baptist theological understanding of worship from its architectural design or church arrangement.

However, in the virtual world, rather than sitting before the Lord's Supper table set in front of the pulpit, it is the computer or an android phone in hand with a bloke capitulating to events as they unfold. The best that can be attained is a simulation of the arrangement described above. One can then say worship in cyberspace reflects no structural theological or spiritual leanings. The sacred physical space is the "domus ecclesiae," "the house of the church." The architectural edifice is for worship action, fashioned to reflect its surroundings. However, one wonders how this applies to the church in cyberspace with no structural buildings. Jacobs poses the same question but in another form regarding virtual signifiers that could distinguish between sacred and profane cyberspace.

> The term "cyberspace" is widely used to indicate the void for actual and potential computer-mediated activity in a way that is homologous to the conception of geographical space as a void for actual and potential physical activity. Sacred places located in geographical space are often identified by particular signifiers, such as architectural style, use of images, and expected protocols of behavior. This leads to the question of whether virtual signifiers can operate in an analogous fashion, demarcating sacred cyberspace from profane cyberspace.

For the larger African audience, the church speaks of the sacred importance of the sanctuary where worship is conducted. Furthermore, it is not just about the actions in that holy spot but connections with fellow devotees with set behavioural expectations and the unseen reality with which they interface. It appears that church leaders are also not seeking clarity on the distinctive significance of the avenue that cyberspace or church provides and their signifiers. They seem content with nothing but the alternate innovative way to reach the unreached and ameliorate the impact of physical meeting loss. Therefore, finding the sacred cyberspace and its significance to the Africans in liturgical practice will continue to subsist. A serious question here

is whether or not the absence of the bodily presence of other worshipers in the same room makes cyberspace a suitable sacred worship space.

To this, Berger affirms that liturgical practices online pose no significant difference in their spiritual impact to their offline version. To further buttress this point, Christopher Helland also said that people using the Internet no longer distinguish between life online and offline. To them, being online is a necessary part of life and social existence. There seems to be a general agreement since both Campbell and Berger stress that online liturgical activities are impossible without a body. However, given its abstract nature, that online worship space cannot do without actual bodies may sound bogus. Instead, it highlights, in a sense, that embodiment of cyberspace is perhaps the central problem in cyber worship practices.

This intricacy is because, as Campbell stated: "New media are digitally coded and based on numerical representations. They are modular in that elements maintain separate identities so they can be stored together, but manipulated separately. They can be automated as operations can be programmed, partly removing the human element." The idea of manipulation suggests a human activity to isolate individuals yet connect them to a moderating place. Therefore, the view of a remote programmer plotting the experience's outcome tended to be a minus and raises the question of whose will is vital in worship. Besides, worshipers' interconnectivity speaks of the essence of the gathering in corporate worship as a faith community in the first place.

Nevertheless, Macalanggan sees in cyber experience a digital transcendence of God who characterises the signing in and out of cyberspace. He understood cyber technology as a tool to help facilitate an encounter with God and proclaim His salvation. Therefore, with no physical reflection, virtual technology can still promote the gospel of salvation. However, the writer is interested in a cyber community of worshipers in a bonded fellowship. O'Leary saw a person's embodiment in virtual space as a "textual construction and an ethos transmuted in virtual reality." However, it is unclear if this description includes God, the object of worship in cyberspace. Apart from pictures, texts, and vocal interactions between virtual worshipers, it seems left to the power of imagination. Given all these complexities, the only plausible route for African church leaders, given that they consider religious values,

will be to see cyberspace as a supplementary place of religious activities, including worship, to foster spiritual intimacy with God. The virtual church supports the physical church and perhaps expands the fellowship of the worshipping community.

The Virtual Holy Communion

The next issue that embodies the worship experience is the Lord's Supper. This ritual meal draws on Christianity's very foundation, and Berger thinks that much of the practice online is shaped by what constitutes active participation offline, and it describes the level of a Christian's activeness in a matter of faith.   This idea is the most challenging part for an African in cyber worship, and it stems from worldviews that see it as a ratification meal of some communal significance.

Notable pastors and scholars such as Oyedepo, 2002; Kustenbauder, 2005; and Ngcobo, 2020, have noted the Lord's Supper's high pedestal. Beyond this, Mbamalu calls for a more scripturally reflective meaning of the Holy Communion to symbolise Christ's redemptive work and to raise a community in His name. However, Jeffrey Salako sees the promotion of what he described as 'individuo-centralism.' That is the unconscious enhancement of individualism in the sense of communal fellowship. It should be noted that cyber Lord's Supper possibly reflects this individualism in a connected atmosphere. In this respect, the purpose of bonding may be suspect with the absence of bodily presence with other believers. Nevertheless, the Eucharist is central to Christian discipleship and spiritual formation and naturally elicits contentions that reflect individual denominational inclinations.

The Holy Communion appears to be a dividing point for many traditions over whether the wine should be alcoholic and whether it is a symbolic reflection of Christ's redemptive work, transubstantiation, or consubstantiation at the point of taking. The Catholic Church tends to short-circuit the debate with a categorical statement on the cyber communion ritual. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, in a document titled 'The Church and Internet,' states for all Catholics that:

> Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the
> Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared

worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith.

This standpoint speaks of cyberspace's limitations on specific, time-tested Christian rituals for which the church anchored her collective existence as a community. There is disagreement about the Lord's Supper's doctrinal status, substance, and practice in the physical realm. The method of this ritual in cyberspace cannot be any different and widens the divide.

However, the cyber world leaves the individual with the choice of discretion and the power of choice. Therefore, the creation of avatars and the virtual activities of online Holy Communion speaks of one effect, the breaking down of traditional institutions. In effect, the taking of the online ritual meal is a usurpation of the pastoral/priestly authority of mediation. All human experience of grace is mediated, but there are enablements and constraints in facilitating a sacrament online. The quest here is about discovering what is enabled and the constraints of liturgical mediations in cyberspace. Worship presents the aesthetic materials in which God is viewed, known and served. Again, although Berger and Helland would agree that online worship cannot do without a body, the question of the integrity, theological or doctrinal association, and the clerical authority of the one mediating online are vital. The only way out of a possible theological controversy seems to be that each church maintains a cyber branch which feeds from a physical church fellowship. The writer doubts if an unknown or entirely independent online church with no doctrinally verifiable pedigree can be trusted.

The Practice of Prayer and Church music in cyberspace

Prayer and music activities of worship online are by far the most vibrant. Those who were online before the lockdown were Pentecostal churches. This lack of proactive effort on the part of traditional Christian churches tends to accelerate the eroding of values. Again, it is not farfetched, given the traditional apprehensions due to the practical need for control. As Matthews Ojo observes, Pentecostal and

Charismatic movements seem to get ahead of traditional mainline churches, and in terms of prayers and music, it is more aligned with the people. He says Pentecostal and Charismatic movements seem to advance because they adopt pragmatic strategies by employing modern tools. With download features, cyberspace has promoted a strong heritage of prayer and music networks for reaching faith community members.

The best chance for social and spiritual solidarity comes with this shared platform on the internet. While mainline churches were locked down, Bible study, prayer meetings, and other programme fellowships were ongoing. There are possibilities of choir rehearsals, music teaching software, composition software, and internet-based plazas such as the Second Life, where one is akin to getting everything possible from religion to secular elements.

Community Life in Cyberspace

David Kim speaks Christianity in the broad context of worldviews based on faith, allowing the people of faith to free themselves from the sacred/secular divide. The most significant gift of faith stems from its sense of community and mutual solidarity. It appears that cyberspace contributes most to the church and humanity here. The capacity to weld social and religious life in one swoop and promote that sense of solidarity irrespective of traditional affinity can help real-life ecumenical causes.

Technology has indeed taken over the cause of everyday life. The church leadership and individual worshippers do need to find suitable means of defining worship practices online. Given the problem of embodiment and the signs and symbols of Christianity that are virtually missing, authorities may need innovative ways of supporting people's online belief system consistent with biblical norms whilst maintaining the faith's collective sense. Macalanggan noted that,

> We integrate our technologies into even the most spiritual dimensions
> of our lives. It is not only our material environment that is transformed
> by our machinery. We take our technology into the deepest recesses of
> our souls. Our view of reality, our structures of meaning, our sense of

identity - all are touched and transformed by the technologies which we have allowed to mediate between ourselves and our world…. For this reason, the church, especially its pastors, should hasten to fulfil their duty in this respect, one which is intimately linked with their ordinary preaching responsibility. The laity, too, who have something to do with the use of these media and should endeavor to bear witness to Christ.

Cyberspace as a platform for pure worship can also be problematic after all is said and done. Church members and leaders have to worry about the dangers of tech-based rituals.

Implications for Worship in cyberspace for the African church

The general picture of religion's online experience is what Magaret Werheim describes as a 'quest for bodily transcendence.' The need to have religion without responsibility or the means to demand or enforce it. Man's inclination for absolute freedom is a concern to watch. It also appears that to have a healthy encounter in cyberspace; one would have done so personally with God. Femi Adedeji believes that interfacing at a personal level is vital to any meaningful worship.

Nevertheless, the corporate embodiment of worship does more than just being together; hence Jesus Christ would instruct the disciples to stay together in an upper room as they wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-14). Therefore, handling this technological offer of worship online may prove tricky, given its amoral nature. However, the following issues arise from the reviews above.

Digital Dualism: The social media theorist, Nathan Jurgenson, coined the term, Digital Dualism, to highlight what he described as the wrong impression that cyberspace could be isolated from daily life. That digital reality comes embodied, material forms are contestable, and here lies the source of the problem experienced in mainstream African churches. The best bet will be to adopt the live-streaming model of worship services for members who cannot be present in physically embodied services for some reason. Christian worship will always symbolise the relational

signs outlined in the Bible and the ritual forms available to the African church. Digital dualism is a term that describes Africans in the digital age.

The fluidity of Cyberspace: An African holds sacred the place of worship, and the embodiment of the sacred space is crucial to this concept. A Christian worship space cannot simultaneously serve as a digital confluence for other religious and social entities and still maintain the special status of a sacred sanctuary. It is believed that a deity is only as powerful as the acceptance of the people. This is where one may miscomprehend God in cyberspace because of the doubts created. Cyberspace is volatile, capital intensive and out of reach for most people due to data subscriptions, and it can be full of network irritations.

Conclusion

In this paper, the writer outlined some apprehensions concerning worship in cyberspace. Arguments bordering on the online worship space's embodiments affect the liturgical ritual practice of the Lord's Supper and some shared spiritual affections online. It is challenging to have the same level of engagement shown in Acts 2: 42-47, where the necessary mutual care resulting from communal fellowship enhanced that community's spiritual growth. Prayers and Music tend to be best suited for online participation. While cyberspace holds the key to the church's social integration and community-building effort, there should be commensurate teachings and counterpart actions to build capacity for creating private platforms available only to the Christian church. This innovation will also reduce the cyber disruption that may inhibit worship time. The writer recommends that worship practices in cyberspace should be for contingencies and not the norm. Also, the time is now for a worship conference of Christian churches to accommodate the new realities and synergise for the benefit of the church, especially in Africa.

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